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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the evolution of the Program for Disadvantaged Youth since 1988, describes its accomplishments and lessons learned, and suggests new directions for the Program to build on its experiences. The Program for Disadvantaged Youth rejects many of the stereotypes about the needs and abilities of young adolescents, many of which are the result of low expectations, as it works to reform urban schools and encourage them to raise expectations of students. Over the course of the project, funding has been provided at various levels for schools in (1) Baltimore (Maryland); (2) Louisville (Kentucky); (3) Oakland (California); (4) San Diego (California); (5) Milwaukee (Wisconsin); (6) Chattanooga (Tennessee); (7) Jackson (Mississippi); and (8) Long Beach (California). Some documented improvements in student achievement and a number of lessons learned about program management and expectations have resulted in recommendations for program improvement. The focus on middle schools is projected to continue, building on what has been learned while the name of the program will be changed to the Program for Student Achievement. A note attached to the study explains that the sponsoring organization approved the recommendations and will be funding the program under its new name. (SLD)

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Program for Disadvantaged Youth

Review and Strategy

March 1994

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Note to readers: On March 2, 1994, the Board of Trustees of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation considered this paper and approved its recommendations. Accordingly, the Program for Student Achievement has replaced the Program for Disadvantaged Youth.

INTRODUCTION

There is a deeply-rooted belief in the culture of public schools serving grades six, seven, and eight that because young adolescents are experiencing dramatic developmental changes, it is more important to provide them with understanding and support, and less important to engage them in challenging educational experiences. Some advocates for these youth question whether higher order thinking is appropriate for middle school students. One national education organization asserts that "many 12 to 14 year olds may experience problems if expectations for continued higher thinking skills are held when a plateau in brain growth exists... [E]mphasis should be directed to learning new facts and information within the profile of thinking skills initiated prior to this plateau period." According to the organization, only "those indicating a readiness to think analytically should be challenged to do so." This point of view echoes through the middle school community. In a major newspaper's story on middle schools, the director of a regional middle school association flippantly refers to seventh grade students as "a little brain dead." A workshop at a national conference of school administrators is titled, "Are Middle School Students Normal?" In pointing out that tracking restricts the options of many students, a national officer of a parent-teacher organization says that some students "don't have that proverbial light bulb go on in their brains until after middle school." The result of these attitudes is best described by the president of a big city school board in assessing his city's failure to effectively educate middle school youth: "So many of our teachers and principals inflict on our kids the worst curse of all: 'Our job is just to help them through school and not to challenge them.'"

The Program for Disadvantaged Youth rejects these characterizations of young adolescents' abilities and needs. We believe they result in low expectations of middle school students' academic

performance. These low expectations generate, in turn, a downward spiral of poor student performance, boredom in classrooms and disorder in hallways, low morale among teachers who wonder why their students are not interested in school, and dispirited, failing schools. This syndrome can be found in any school serving young adolescents, but in more advantaged communities schools usually seek the level of parental expectations and provide an education that is more or less adequate. In disadvantaged communities, particularly inner cities, most schools do not feel the pressure of parental expectations, and they drift in a sea of large bureaucracies, overwhelming social problems, and unpredictable funding. These factors can even mask schools' low expectations of young adolescents and become convenient excuses for students' poor academic experience.

During the past five years, the Program for Disadvantaged Youth has validated what we assumed when we began our middle school reform initiative: Urban schools can reform themselves to raise teachers' expectations of students, strengthen teachers' knowledge of content and use of pedagogy, and enable students to perform at higher levels. Contrary to what many people believe, achieving these ends requires neither large expenditures nor charismatic leaders; it is possible through the extraordinary efforts of "ordinary" teachers and administrators.

The purpose of this paper is to review the evolution of the Program for Disadvantaged Youth since 1988, describe its accomplishments and lessons learned, and suggest new directions for the Program which build on its experience to date.

EVOLUTION OF THE PROGRAM GOAL

The Program for Disadvantaged Youth was approved by the Trustees in June, 1988. At that time, we described the Program goal as helping "schools make changes necessary to provide disadvantaged youth in grades six through nine with educational experiences of high expectations,

high content, and high support." Between the time disadvantaged youth leave grade five and enter grade ten, we aspired that they would:

(1) Remain in school and complete the middle grades curriculum, on time;

(2) Exhibit mastery of higher order reasoning, thinking, and comprehension skills;

(3) Exhibit improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, and attitudes toward school and schoolwork, as a result of regularly engaging in supportive interactions with adults;

(4) Enter high school with an understanding of how different curriculums can affect their career and/or postsecondary education options, and will select programs of study that will enable them to pursue their choices.

At their June, 1989 meeting, the Trustees awarded two-year grants of up to $400,000 each to the Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego school systems. Each school system used the grants to "develop and support an education of high expectations, high content, and high support to disadvantaged youth in the middle grades." Each school system was to use two or three middle schools as prototypes for reforms, and we expected the central offices to draw on the experiences of these schools to stimulate and inform the reform process at other middle schools. In 1991 and again in 1993, the Trustees awarded the Louisville and San Diego school systems two-year grants. Because of uncertainties surrounding leadership changes in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Oakland, the Trustees awarded them one-year grants in 1991, 1992, and 1993.

In the spring of 1992, we invited three additional systems to develop proposals describing how during the 1992-93 school year they would "develop a vision, strategy, plan, and timetable for systemic middle school reform." The Trustees awarded grants of $125,000 each to the Chattanooga, TN; Jackson, MS; and Long Beach, CA school systems. At the end of their grants, the systems submitted proposals seeking Foundation support to implement their plans. In September, 1993, we recommended two-year grants to Chattanooga and Long Beach for system-wide middle school

reform. After revising its proposal, Jackson also received an implementation grant in December, 1993.

In the 1992 Program Update, we reported that "during the past three years we have seen the need to state more explicitly that the goal is to increase student achievement...Middle school reform, we believe, must be shaped and judged by whether it enhances student performance." We rephrased the goal to read:

> The Program for Disadvantaged Youth encourages and supports selected urban school systems to significantly enhance the performance of students in grades six through nine by reforming middle schools. This reform will create an education of high expectations, high content, and high support.

WHAT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED

Student achievement is the bottom line for the middle school reform initiatives in Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego. It is also the yardstick against which the Program measures its own accomplishments. Although the evaluative information is not yet conclusive, we can report on the impact of middle school reform after four and a half years on three levels: students, schools, and central offices. The school systems in Chattanooga, Jackson, and Long Beach are already showing promising signs of future progress. The Program has also prompted national organizations to pay greater attention to urban middle schools, and pursue strategies that target student achievement.

Over the past two to three years, student learning has improved in the Foundation-assisted schools in three of the five cities, even if the gains are small and the precise meanings of student achievement scores are open to interpretation. Since 1989, the Education Resources Group (ERG) has been documenting and evaluating the Program's reform efforts in the five cities, and it will produce a summative report by 1996 based on its analysis of test scores. ERG reports that a preliminary review of the data from 1989-90 to 1992-93 shows that students achieving in the bottom 25 percent are

"gradually moving into the second quartile [25 to 50 percent bracket]." In Baltimore in 1992-93, higher percentages of students at Calverton and West Baltimore middle schools passed a basic skills test administered by the state than in 1991-92. Although there were increases in reading, math, and writing, the most dramatic gains were in math for both Calverton (40 percent passed in 1992-93 vs. 20 percent in 1991-92) and West Baltimore (51 percent passed in 1992-93 vs. 36 percent in 1991-92).

Compared to 1991-92, when Kentucky's new state assessments were first administered, eighth graders at Louisville's three project schools in 1992-93 performed at higher levels in reading and science. The assessment tasks performed by students are rated according to four categories: novice, apprentice, proficient, distinguished. At all three schools, students improved the most in reading, with a ten percentage point or greater increase in the number of students at the apprentice level. Western Middle School students made dramatic gains in math, with a 22 percentage point drop in novice scorers and increases in the other three categories by 13 percentage points (apprentice), five percentage points (proficient), and four percentage points (distinguished). Responding to the Program's request to evaluate one or more aspects of the curriculum and instruction in their schools, a group of teachers at Iroquois Middle School studied the effects of Writing To Learn, a comprehensive writing development program. Between 1991-92 and 1992-93, the state assessment scores in writing showed fewer students at the novice level (69 percent in 1992-93 vs. 89 percent in 1991-92) and more students at the apprentice level (27 percent vs. 10 percent).

San Diego's Muirlands Middle School has struggled with how to increase the achievement levels of Latino students who come to the school through a voluntary desegregation program. Scores from a state-mandated test show that the Latino students are improving considerably. In 1989-90, the first year of the middle school reform initiative, the Latino eighth graders at Muirlands scored lower than the district average for eighth grade Latino students in reading, math, history, science, and writing. In 1991-92, they scored higher than Latino students district-wide, most notably in

writing and math. One measure of the school's progress for both Latino and white students is the proportion qualifying for "gifted" classes. Although white students still outnumber Latino students in "gifted" classes, both Latino and white students at Muirlands in 1992-93 surpassed their respective averages throughout the district (50 percent of Muirlands Latino students identified as "gifted" vs. 30 percent of district Latino students; 70 percent of Muirlands white students vs. 50 percent of district white students). Just the year before, the district averages were higher than the percentages for Muirlands students, both Latino and white.

Teachers are challenging students with more rigorous content in their classes, and project schools are making such classes available to increasing numbers of students. This push toward higher content is most apparent in the increased numbers of algebra and pre-algebra classes in four of the five districts. In 1992-93, Kosciuszko Middle School in Milwaukee had 53 percent of its students taking pre-algebra or algebra, compared to just seven percent in 1991-92; similarly, Parkman had 75 percent last year compared to 38 percent two years ago. All eighth graders at West Baltimore enrolled in algebra last year, with classes progressing at varying rates but all using the same textbook. Calverton, also in Baltimore, had enough eighth graders ready for algebra to fill ten classes last year, compared to four in 1991-92. King Estates Junior High School in Oakland has been implementing the Algebra Project for four years. This year, all seventh graders (lowest grade in the school) are using Algebra Project techniques to prepare them for algebra, and there is even one geometry class for ninth graders.

Concerned about the low achievement of its Latino students, Muirlands Middle School in San Diego decided to pursue a dramatic and difficult solution — to detrack the humanities classes in two out of three grades. One outcome has been that more students after the sixth grade are being certified as "gifted." Seventh grade teachers also believe that students are coming to their classes more focused and more prepared academically.

Despite turnover in leadership and shrinkage in staff positions due to budget cutbacks, three of the five central offices are providing tools for reform to their middle schools. In 1992-93, San Diego held its first conference for all middle school educators. Since 1988, the district has also sponsored a summer institute on interdisciplinary teaching. Teachers from every middle level school in the district have participated in or presented at the institute. In 1992, the central office in Baltimore established a formal mechanism through which to lead, monitor, and sustain middle school reform. Its Institute for Middle School Reform represents an important commitment to the middle grades, even if its full implementation is still in question. Beginning this school year, Louisville dedicated a portion of its grant from the Foundation to provide planning assistance to 19 additional middle schools.

In 1989, there were no strong national advocates of urban middle school reform. *Since then, the Program has been encouraging several organizations to work with urban middle schools and educators, and we can point to experiences and resources that now provide national support for middle school reform.* The National Middle School Association (NMSA) has renewed its interest in expanding and better serving its urban constituency. It is creating a new urban committee as part of its organizational structure, and, in 1995, will become the permanent publisher of *High Strides*, the Foundation-initiated periodical about urban middle schools. This year, NMSA, together with the National Staff Development Council, held the third annual conference for urban middle-level education.

The Accelerated Schools Project at Stanford University began applying its principles and program to middle schools in 1989. There are now at least a dozen accelerated middle schools and many coaches who specifically train staff at middle schools. In its fourth year as the first pilot middle school, Burnett Academy in San Jose, CA, is showing academic gains which are attributed in large part to the involvement of the Accelerated Schools Project.

The Algebra Project, Children's Express, Council for Basic Education (Writing To Learn), Great Books Foundation, and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) project have become premier resource organizations for urban middle schools interested in high content curricula, staff development, and strategies to engage low-achieving students. The HOTS project has created a math curriculum for middle schools that complements the regular HOTS program. In addition, the Association of Junior Leagues International is raising middle school awareness in several cities.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The past five years produced lessons which we will want to keep in mind and apply as we consider the Program's future.

(1) *We Need to Clearly Communicate Our Expectations* — In the early years of the Program, we were attempting to establish a new paradigm for middle school education — "high expectations, high content, and high support" — that was necessary but vague. Because we did not clearly communicate what we thought schools should do, the schools did not focus their efforts. Our emphasis on four specific objectives helped focus the schools somewhat more; they were more likely to mount activities which would help them achieve the objectives. When we began to talk more explicitly about middle school *reform* as the focus of our interests, the schools began to consider what it might mean to re-form themselves. Finally, when we developed a request for proposal for Chattanooga, Jackson, and Long Beach in early 1992, we stated clearly that we were interested in developing "a partnership with a school system intending to increase significantly students' academic achievement by reforming middle schools." We were more explicit about what we wanted, drew upon our experiences to fashion an RFP which guided the school system, and even appended to the RFP a statement of the Program's "vision and philosophy." These steps we took elicited responses from school systems whose interests were more congruent with our own. We have learned the

importance of clarity in knowing what we want and in communicating our expectations and goals, while at the same time considering how prescriptive we want to, and can, be.

(2) *Motivation Is Important* — When we selected the five school systems, we did not give enough attention to **why** the school systems were seeking Foundation support. We have learned that while it is always difficult to discern the motives of school systems, we are well advised to proceed cautiously. We should take time to understand why a school system wants to work with the Foundation in a relationship that is as demanding as it is supportive. At the same time, we have learned that the Foundation's pre-grant requirements (matching funds by school systems, staff leadership for middle school reform, and even attendance at national conferences) can enable superintendents to take actions that might otherwise be politically difficult.

(3) *Technical Assistance Is Essential* — It is tempting to assume that educators, because they have college and graduate degrees, or manage multi-million dollar institutions, should know how to reform middle schools to enhance student performance. This is not the case. Most educators have adapted to a working environment in which expectations are low, emphasis is on operations rather than outcomes, and there are few incentives and little time to improve. They do not see themselves as reformers, and they have little or no training or experience that prepares them for this role. Administrators and teachers are products of the education system that needs reform, and they, like many of the students they teach, are not self-directed learners. Consequently, if a school board, legislature, or even the Foundation wants to help educators change how they structure and operate schools, and how they teach students, we will have to help them learn how to do so. This requires a good deal of time and support, not to mention money, patience, and allowance for mistakes.

(4) *Staff Development Is Crucial* — Each day, teachers in urban school systems face many low-performing students with a staggering array of problems. Most teachers know they are not equipped to successfully engage these students in learning, and they are hungry for the inspiration

and pedagogy that can help them enhance student performance. While some teachers resist opportunities to improve, we have been encouraged by the enthusiastic responses of most when they can learn from skilled and committed professionals, including their peers.

As practiced in most school systems, staff development is an underutilized and often wasted resource for school reform. However, we have learned that high quality staff development makes a difference. It can increase teachers' self-confidence and sense of professionalism, as well as their energy and effectiveness. While we still have only limited evidence of the linkage between quality staff development, changes in instruction, and improved student performance, we are encouraged by teachers' testimonials of how they have benefitted from Foundation-supported professional development.

(5) *Stability Is Rare* — In the large school systems supported by the Foundation, there has been constant turnover of persons leading the Foundation-assisted initiatives. Over the past five years, there have been 16 changes in principals at the 12 project schools, and none of the original superintendents in the five districts are still in place. Each change in a key leadership position caused some loss of momentum in the initiative, even though many of the changes resulted in more effective administrators. This experience has taught us that while we can seek school systems' commitments to stability of project leaders, we need to be wary of their assurances on this front. It is a mistake for us to make school reform dependent on a few leaders and personalities. It is essential to find ways to broaden the base of reform by increasing more educators' investment in the reform process and developing more advocates for reform.

(6) *Outcomes Are Paramount* — School systems and middle schools that want to reform need to be clear about the results they are seeking. The clearer they are, the more likely it is that the reforms will achieve the results they want; yet most educators shy away from delineating desired outcomes because it raises difficult issues of accountability and measurement. Few reform initiatives

face this problem honestly, which is all the more reason for us to use our leverage to insist that school systems/schools do so and then to work with them over a sustained period to keep the focus on results.

(7) *There Is a Continuum of Middle School Reform* — During the past five years, we have observed that middle school reform moves along a continuum. This continuum is for illustrative purposes only; schools' behaviors are neither linear nor immutable. Schools may skip a point on the continuum or address several points simultaneously. Nevertheless, as represented by the schematic on the following page, schools which move through the reform process pass through several stages before they focus primarily on student performance.

This has profound implications for the Foundation's choice of school systems as partners. Moving through the first few steps of the continuum involves changes in grade configuration and school organization which may create a more personalized teaching and learning environment, but if middle schools stop there without consciously improving the content and quality of classroom learning, they will have little positive effect on student outcomes. The middle schools that have moved through the earlier stages can provide a more fruitful context for implementing reforms designed to increase student achievement, meaning that the greatest opportunity for the Program may be in the middle of the continuum. School systems that have already moved through the first three points on the continuum are more likely to apply Foundation resources in ways that will enhance student performance.

(8) *Desired Outcomes Should Shape the School* — Like most other schools, the ones assisted by the Foundation during the past several years were oriented towards operations, events, and curricula as ends in themselves rather than helping all students perform at high levels. This is still the case more than we would like, but there are indicators that schools are beginning to reform curricula and instruction to enable students to perform at levels set by the school system or state.

THE CONTINUUM OF MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM

MAXIMUM

(7) Middle schools with majority of students meeting local/state performance standards by the end of grade 8, *and/or* enrolling in grade 9 college prep curriculum

(6) Middle schools that organize and hold themselves accountable for preparing all students to perform at high levels

(5) Middle schools whose staff demonstrate their commitment to high expectations and access to high content for students, with appropriate support for low-performing students

(4) Middle schools with large numbers of teachers consistently participating in high quality staff development to strengthen their knowledge and practice of subject content, pedagogy, development of young adolescents, etc.

(3) Middle schools with structures such as "houses," teams, advisories, exploratory courses, common preparation periods, etc.

(2) Schools with grades 6, 7, 8 that call themselves "middle schools"

(1) Schools with two or more of grades 6, 7, 8

MINIMUM

In some school systems, our efforts have paralleled and complemented the implementation of a state's new performance assessment and accountability system; Louisville is the most notable example. While the Kentucky approach seems to be the wave of the future, it will take more than legislation or administrative directives to get teachers and administrators to focus on outcomes and to use them as guides to reform their schools. Such a focus not only requires a sea change in attitudes, but in school systems' incentive and reward structures and in their assessment procedures.

(9) *Our Control Is Limited* — Supporting reform in urban school systems is a humbling experience. A Foundation grant represents a small fraction of a school system's budget, and Program staff are not a daily presence in the school system or community. There are scores of personal, institutional, and community interests which drive school officials, administrators, and teachers more than the interests of the Foundation. While the flexibility of the Foundation's grants, the status and recognition they convey, the challenge of the Program's vision, and the power of its strategy and the persistence of its staff can influence the direction of a school system, our *control* at the local level is extremely limited. This makes it all the more important to identify school systems that genuinely share the Program's goals and that have the will, integrity, and leadership to do so. We are best able to identify these school systems if we have the opportunity to get well acquainted before recommending a major grant.

(10) *Everything Takes Longer Than We Want* — We expect a lot of school systems, but we have been slow to recognize that it takes school systems/schools longer than we would like to understand, plan for, and effectively implement reform, and assess its results. To implement reforms that enhance student performance, school systems and schools need to advance simultaneously on many fronts while continuing to operate. Under the best of circumstances, this is a complex and difficult task, but most urban school systems/schools are not operating under the best of circumstances. This requires us to be sober and realistic about what schools can accomplish and how

fast they can accomplish it. There is also a rhythm and pattern to schools and the school year (which we hope will change as more schools convert to year-round), not to mention educators' behaviors, that strongly influences the pace of reform. It is important for us to continue to be impatient with the pace of reform, and to communicate the sense of urgency to school systems, but we need to keep in mind that school systems and schools are unlikely to reform quickly. At the same time, the Program is continuing to gain insights about the sequencing of the reform process, which makes it possible to establish a rhythm of reform congruent with our philosophy that the process must be finite.

(11) *Results of Reform Are Difficult to Measure and Communicate* — We have struggled with ourselves, outside evaluators, school districts, and schools about how to understand the effects of middle school reform on student learning. Standardized, norm-referenced tests still dominate school districts' measurement of student achievement, but the test results provide little practical guidance to teachers trying to improve their teaching and raise student achievement. These tests are inherently limited in what they can measure, and their format runs counter to the in-depth, analytical learning experiences that middle schools should provide their students. Teachers and administrators often receive the test results after the students have moved on to the next grade. Because of the high mobility among students in some urban schools, it is also difficult to know what test results really mean. If, for example, a school tests students' performance in the eighth grade but a significant proportion of the students taking the test have only been enrolled in the school for one year or less, the test results may not be a fair indicator of the education the school provides. Professional organizations, state departments of education, and school districts are experimenting with alternative assessments which promise to be more descriptive indicators of student performance. Even with these new methods for measuring what students know and can do, however, schools need

to learn how to share student performance information with teachers, parents, and students in a meaningful way.

NEW PROGRAM GOAL

Based on these and other lessons of the Program, what course should we chart for the future? We believe we should continue our focus on the reform of middle schools in urban school systems. We propose to build on what we have learned to date to launch an initiative that will make student performance the focal point of middle school reform, and increase student achievement in selected school systems supported by the Foundation. We also propose to change the name of the Program for Disadvantaged Youth to the Program for Student Achievement. The new Program's emphasis would continue to be on inner-city school systems and schools where large proportions of students are from low-income families and/or performing at low levels.

We also propose a new goal for the Program:

> *The goal of the Program for Student Achievement is for students in urban middle schools to demonstrate high levels of academic performance by the end of the eighth grade. The Program also aspires to increase the numbers of school systems, middle schools, and organizations throughout the nation embracing and advocating high levels of student performance as the primary goal of middle level education.*

Realistically, not all middle school students will perform at high levels, but we believe that nearly all have the ability to do so and that, with effective support, they can. However, to achieve this result, school systems and their middle schools will have to reform themselves dramatically. To determine whether students can perform at high levels, school systems the Program recommends for support will establish measurable student performance goals and benchmarks for reforms necessary to help students meet the goals. The Program will be especially interested in school systems which can

establish student achievement goals in relation to academic standards promulgated at state or local levels. The standards themselves will vary from site to site, and we will negotiate with each school system what proportion of students should meet the standards at what level.

By the end of the Program's new initiative, in 2001, we will have accomplished the following objectives:

(1) Students graduating from the eighth grade in school systems supported by the Foundation from 1995 to 2001 will meet the states' and/or school systems' academic standards in at least four subject areas — language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.

(2) School systems supported by the Foundation will have reformed their middle schools to enable students to meet local and/or state academic standards by the time students graduate from the eighth grade. These reforms will include specific initiatives to enable the lowest achieving students (e.g. students performing in the lowest 30 percent of their grade) to meet the academic standards.

(3) In communities with school systems supported by the Foundation, two or more local organizations outside of the system will have program components that advocate, monitor, and/or support school system and community initiatives to enable middle school students to meet state and/or local academic standards.

(4) One or more national organizations committed to enhancing the performance of low-achieving youth will advocate and support middle school reforms in urban school systems.

STANDARDS AS LEVERAGE FOR REFORM

We have chosen to make *academic* standards the focal point for school districts and schools that the Foundation supports. It is important to understand what we do and do not mean by "standards." Generally speaking, we mean statements that broadly describe what students should

know and be able to do (called "content standards") and delineate how well they should know and be able to do it (called "performance standards"). Although there is much debate about the pros and cons of "national standards," these are not the focus of our strategy. Instead, we are interested in standards developed by state education agencies that apply to local school systems, or standards adopted by local school systems. The standards we have in mind are not narrow behavioral objectives, but statements that convey high expectations of what students should know and be able to do by the time they complete the eighth grade.

Our increasing interest in standards parallels the growing activity at the national and state levels to more systematically raise expectations for achievement for all students. Most national discipline-specific (English, math, etc.) professional associations are developing and promulgating content standards, and increasing numbers of states are adopting eighth grade performance standards. According to the Education Commission of the States, 25 states have "developed or implemented some form of outcomes . . . [or] statements about what students should know and be able to do as a result of their education," including Arizona, California, Delaware, Kansas, Kentucky, and North Carolina. The proliferation of standards will almost certainly influence states' assessments of student performance.

We believe that the new emphasis on standards and learning outcomes is appropriate and necessary. Too many middle schools are adrift because they have failed to go beyond the structures and processes that primarily address early adolescents' developmental needs. In many urban school systems, even these components are lacking, and schools called "middle schools" are no more student-centered or nurturing than other schools. In these settings, disadvantaged students are receiving neither high support nor high content. We come to the focus on standards, then, not because they are the latest educational fad, but because we believe they can become an effective lever for schools to better educate more students. The growing national movement for content and

performance standards represents an opportunity we should seize. As is now happening in Kentucky because of that state's education reform legislation, schools will be under greater pressure to demonstrate that they can enhance student performance. Most middle schools are unprepared to meet this challenge, but it can cause them to initiate reforms that have the potential to increase the numbers of students meeting performance standards.

There is much controversy surrounding the creation and implementation of standards, and not every state's effort will translate into high quality and rigorous expectations for achievement. The Education Commission of the States identifies four "common arguments" in favor of standards: they should promote high expectations and greater learning for all students, prepare students for life and work in the 21st century, foster more authentic forms of assessment, and guide decision-making regarding curriculum, teaching methods, school structure and management at each school or district level. In addition, standards should emphasize depth in knowledge and encourage the use of analytical and thinking skills, not mandate a list of topics or subjects that teachers must simply "cover." We would look for all these characteristics in the standards of states where we might become involved.

Some people argue that until urban schools have resources (financing, quality staff, curricula, materials, etc.) to enable students to achieve high standards, it is not fair to hold the schools accountable. The first order of business, they say, is for schools to meet "opportunity-to-learn standards" which delineate the conditions schools must provide to enable students to achieve content and performance standards. While the Program's experience to date supports the view that reform is a prerequisite for improving student performance, we do not equate reform with obtaining additional resources. If disadvantaged students and their parents cannot expect schools to help students achieve high standards until the schools meet opportunity-to-learn standards, then significant increases in student achievement will be a long time coming. Also, there is little reason to hope that

during the next decade, and probably beyond, urban school systems will acquire the resources they need to equal those of more advantaged systems. We believe the Foundation's message should be that urban school systems must give greater priority now to enabling all students to perform at high levels, and better focus and utilize resources to achieve this end.

Establishing the new goal for the Program for Student Achievement is, however, not without risks. Fully-developed standards are not in place in most states or most school districts. The number of urban school systems "ready" to enhance student performance by reforming middle schools is small, and, when we find them, such systems may not be using state or locally-developed eighth grade standards. We should be open, therefore, to developing relationships with school systems in states that are engaging in reform-oriented efforts other than standards *per se*. For example, some states have adopted "curriculum frameworks" which they have mandated for all schools. These frameworks identify major issues, concepts, themes, and questions that teachers should address in particular subject areas, and may provide guidance on how to effectively teach and assess these concepts. While curriculum frameworks are what one observer describes as "higher order blueprints for what schools should teach," which is not the same as what students should know, they may be as close as some states come to promulgating standards.

Other states have pursued a different strategy to indirectly pressure local school systems to strengthen their curricula and instruction. They have adopted assessment systems using tests that require higher levels of student performance than traditional basic skills or minimum competency tests. For example, the Connecticut Mastery Tests consist of complex questions requiring analysis and problem-solving in reading, writing, and mathematics. In the first administration of the tests last September, the percentage of eighth graders achieving the state goals on all three tests ranged from a low of 2.9 percent in the largest cities to a high of 50.8 percent in the most affluent suburbs. States using these new tests hope publicity about the low levels of student performance will cause

local school systems to implement reforms that will ultimately result in students performing better on the tests. While our preference is to identify school systems that have delineated content and performance standards, we would consider recommending grants for school systems which new state assessment systems are pushing towards reform. *Preliminary to recommending support for any school system, we would negotiate with it to establish student performance goals and interim benchmarks of progress.*

If the Program for Student Achievement does pursue standards-driven reform, the Foundation would be one of only a handful of organizations and funders trying to leverage increased student performance through the application of standards. We are disappointed that the middle school community has paid little attention to the standards issue; some educators may even regard the emphasis on standards as contrary to middle schools' traditional focus on students' emotional, psychological, and physical needs. However, we believe schools must simultaneously address these needs and enable students to meet high academic standards.

STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

To achieve the Program goal, we propose *a three-fold strategy*. **First**, we would seek to support up to four urban school systems that have initiated system-wide middle school reform to enable students to meet high academic standards by the time they graduate from eighth grade. **Second**, in the communities of these school systems, we would seek to generate broader understanding and support for middle school reform, and for content and performance standards as focal points for middle schools. **Third**, we would establish a national network of organizations advancing middle school reform.

First Strategy: Support for Urban School Systems

I. Selecting school systems — The Program for Student Achievement would become involved with urban school systems that include an inner city, and have at least 20,000 students enrolled, with at least 30 percent of the students identified as "minority" and/or from families in poverty. Selected school systems should be in the process of meeting the following conditions:

The school board:

- provides the school system with an effective superintendent, works with her/him to provide other effective leaders at the district and building levels, and minimizes turnover among them;
- develops and promulgates a succinct statement of what middle schools should be and do for young adolescents, makes a public commitment to reform middle schools to enhance student performance, and achieves this goal in partnership with building-level teachers and administrators;
- establishes a coherent grade configuration for all schools serving grades six, seven, and eight (possibilities include 6-8, 5-8, or 4-8 schools, or a combination of these);
- commits significant amounts of local and state funding to support middle school reform;
- with assistance from central office staff, develops or adopts standards for what all students in grades six, seven, and eight should know and be able to do (content standards) by the time they leave the eighth grade, and how well they should know and do it (performance standards);
- approves a system for assessing whether, and to what extent, students meet the school system's content and performance standards (this assessment system produces information which is useful to the central office staff, middle school administrators and teachers, parents and the public at large);

- holds central office and middle school administrators accountable for working with their staffs to plan, implement, and assess reform to enhance student performance.

The superintendent (with central office staff):

- designates a person or committee (directly accountable to the superintendent) that is responsible for leading, facilitating, coordinating, supporting, monitoring, and assessing the reform of middle schools throughout the district;
- identifies all resources, across program areas and administrative divisions, that the school system can mobilize to support middle school teachers and administrators in their reform initiatives;
- recognizes that, out of the available resources, staff development for teachers and administrators is particularly vital to enhancing student performance, and works with the middle schools to redesign the content and structure of staff development;
- publishes and disseminates annually a public report describing the goals of middle school reform, strategies and activities the school system and schools have implemented to achieve the goals, their effects on student performance, and the articulation of middle school reforms with elementary and high school reforms.

The professional association representing teachers in the district participates in discussions about how to advance middle school reform, and endorses the implementation of reforms to enhance student performance.

The middle schools:

- have either a 6-8, 5-8, or 4-8 grade configuration, use the components of the characteristics typically associated with middle schools ("houses," interdisciplinary teams, advisories, etc.), and shape their instruction to meet the developmental needs of young adolescents;

- regard as their primary mission to enable all students to meet high standards, and manifest higher expectations of all students;
- investigate, analyze, and agree on the standards their students are expected to meet, and help students and parents understand them;
- change their structure, operations, and curriculum and instruction to enhance student performance, and commit the time and energy, and take the risks, that the reform process requires;
- provide rigorous and engaging courses to help students master content through deep learning experiences, and facilitate all students' access to high content courses and teaching;
- advance student learning by organizing student-centered opportunities for inquiry, practice, dialogue, and demonstration which prepare students to meet the performance standards;
- mobilize their staffs in a collaborative effort to help students achieve the desired outcomes, by supporting and learning from each other;
- seek technical assistance from an outside organization to assist in planning, keeping on track, learning from the reform experiences of other schools, and monitoring and assessing the reform process;
- regularly assess students to determine their progress and problems in meeting the performance standards, and evaluate whether and how their operations, and new instructional methods, curricula, and staff development enhance student performance;
- routinely analyze and discuss results of student performance assessments and make changes in instruction, structure, operations, curricula, and/or personnel to enable more students to meet the standards;

- facilitate all teachers and administrators to regularly participate in intensive, high quality staff development to apply the knowledge and skills that enable students to meet the performance standards.

In identifying school systems to consider for support, our primary criteria would be the potential of their reforms to enable students to meet high standards, and their commitment to be held accountable for results. No urban school system, large or small, has achieved this goal to any significant extent, and we believe that it will be extremely difficult for any system. For this reason, the factors of size (beyond the minimum above), geographical location, or "need" (in the sense of a school system with severely limited funding, myriad of social problems, ineffective leadership, and low morale) will not be criteria for selection. The Foundation lacks the resources to "rescue" such school systems, even though they may present interesting and instructive challenges. Although nearly all urban school systems are in "need," we would carefully select those that demonstrate the capacity and intention to enhance student performance within the resources and time frame of the Program's strategy.

II. Evaluating Results — To determine whether and to what extent grantee school systems are progressing towards the Program's goal, and what they achieve by the end of our relationship, we will place greater emphasis on the school systems' own assessment and reporting of student performance. We choose this course instead of supporting an independent *outcomes* evaluation. From the outset, an external outcomes evaluation creates an adversarial relationship. Staffs of the school system and schools may perceive the evaluation as an indication that we do not trust them to provide accurate information, or that we doubt their competence to do so. At the conclusion of a typical external evaluation, district and school staffs have learned little and have developed no new assessment skills. Indeed, they can more easily ignore or rebut the results of such an evaluation

because they, their schools, and their students have been the "subjects" rather than active participants. If educators do not "own" the assessment process, they are not likely to take it seriously or use its results to stimulate and inform subsequent reforms.

We would use our resources and energy to press school systems and schools to (a) be clear about the student performance outcomes they are seeking to achieve, (b) plan and implement reforms that will most likely enable students to achieve the outcomes, (c) carefully assess, in different ways and at different levels, how the reforms affect student performance, and (d) openly report student performance in relation to the standards. We will raise these issues early in our contact with school systems, and seek firm commitments before we recommend school systems for Foundation support. During the time that school systems receive Foundation support, we will ask each of them to publish an annual report on student performance in the middle grades to be used as an accountability tool for middle school reform. We would ask the systems to share these reports with the Advisory Committee, Trustees, and staff of the Foundation, and disseminate them throughout their communities.

We believe this approach will, in the long run, be more rewarding and productive for the Foundation and the school systems; however, it is a departure from past practice for both the Foundation and the systems. We will need to identify, and develop relationships, with the relatively few people who understand the elements and processes of education evaluation, and have the personality, communication skills, and commitment to win the confidence of local educators and increase their capacities to more effectively assess reforms and student performance. We do not anticipate recommending support for the development or application of sophisticated new management information systems or complex student performance assessments. We will recommend support to help school systems and schools make better use of existing data, and/or help schools use promising and practical methods to conduct their own assessments.

It is also important for us to organize a documentation process for learning from the reform initiatives of school systems supported by the Foundation. Our current experience with documenters/evaluators Barbara Neufeld (Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, and San Diego) and Barbara Berns (Chattanooga, Jackson, and Long Beach), as well as the Focused Reporting Project (Chattanooga and Long Beach), will inform how we shape this documentation. Its primary purpose will be to help us answer questions similar to the following (the questions may change based on new information and insights during coming months):

- What is the degree of understanding among staff at the school system and building levels of the standards (or frameworks or assessments) for student performance?
- At the district level, does the implementation of standards (or frameworks or assessments) promote more vigorous, focused leadership for middle school reform, improved allocation and coordination of resources (technical assistance to schools, staff development), effective monitoring of reforms and student performance, and hands-on support for middle schools? If so, how?
- At the building level, does the implementation of standards stimulate changes in curriculum, instruction, and school operations and structures? If they do, are they contributing to changes that are most likely to improve student achievement? Do standards enhance staff commitment to increasing achievement for all students, and opportunities for high content learning and academic support for the lowest achieving students?
- What new policies, practices, and structures of the school system and schools are most effective in enhancing student performance?
- Does the implementation of standards improve communication between the school system and parents about student performance outcomes at the middle grades? Does the implementation of standards increase the school system's accountability to the public for increasing student achievement?

• Do standards increase the capacity of school staffs to select, implement, and evaluate reforms that enhance student learning? Do standards leave room for individual schools to craft their own reforms, or do they lead to a "cookie cutter" approach to reform?

• How does the implementation of standards influence the way in which the central office and individual schools measure, monitor, and communicate student outcomes? How does the implementation of standards change the district's student assessment system?

While the Foundation would be the primary audience for this evaluation, we would share the evaluators' findings with the sites and beyond.

III. Implementation — *We anticipate that no school system will be at a level of readiness to meet all conditions* listed in Section I above, and we will need to proceed in two phases. In *Phase I*, we will select a small number of school systems and provide up to one year of support to lay the foundation for serious reform initiatives. We recognize that some of the promising school systems for which we might recommend planning grants may not have a set of standards *per se*, but would at least have state-identified learning outcomes for students, curriculum frameworks for subject areas, or performance-based assessment systems. During Phase I, we would expect the selected school systems to develop a vision, strategy, plan, and timetable for middle school reform, and explore and identify technical assistance, exemplary programs, and school reform models. In addition, these school systems may use the planning year for developing and disseminating eighth grade content and performance standards. This process will most likely include building-level staffs becoming familiar with state and/or district standards, and determining how to implement them at each middle school. With all Phase I school systems, we will negotiate annual benchmarks of progress for student and school performance, and specify the student achievement goal to be met by the end of a five-year period.

We would use a request for proposal similar to that which we used for Chattanooga, Jackson, and Long Beach, but modified to reflect our current thinking and insights. For example, we would ask school systems to organize their plans for reform so middle schools develop the characteristics set forth above. The 12-month planning period will also provide Program staff with the time to increase our understanding of the school systems as well as establish communication and a working relationship with state officials to better understand the state standards and/or assessment system. After about eight months of involvement with the school systems, we will determine whether they are eligible for consideration for additional Foundation support for implementing reforms. We anticipate requesting a local match from each school system's general operating funds.

Phase II would be the implementation period. School systems that perform satisfactorily throughout Phase I would be invited by the Program to submit proposals for two-year implementation grants. Subsequently, Phase II school systems would have opportunities to submit proposals for Phase III and Phase IV, the former lasting for two years and the latter for 21 months. So long as a school system is assisted by the Foundation, its future support would be dependent on it making a persuasive case each September that it is progressing towards agreed-upon benchmarks of progress and student performance goals. If a school system succeeds in doing so, it could be assisted by the Foundation from January, 1996 to September, 2001. Because some of the school systems we are currently supporting may be farther advanced than any new systems we identify, we will consider involving them in this new initiative.

From the outset, we will insist that the school systems should predicate plans for middle school reform on the assumption that they will require more resources for a longer period than the Foundation can provide. We may drive home this message by establishing as a prerequisite for Foundation support that the school systems match Foundation support. We would probably recommend somewhat larger grants than in the past. This would take into account that the school

systems would be using the grant for technical assistance, staff development, and program consultants. Unlike the Program's 1989-95 experience, we would not make separate grant recommendations for these purposes. We would also request a match from each school system. The match could be funds the school system explicitly allocates, for the first time, for middle school reform, or the cost of activities/staff/support (e.g., staff development) which the school system reconfigures or reassigns for the explicit purpose of helping students meet content and performance standards. In addition, we would encourage the school system to obtain grants from local funders (foundations, businesses, civic organization, or individuals) to further support the reform initiative. A school system would have to commit a significant amount of the total project budget for a small grants program to groups of middle school teachers for reflection, learning, and assessment directly related to enabling all students to meet content and performance standards.

We would recommend a change in the cycle for considering and recommending grants for school systems. In the past, the Trustees considered Program recommendations for grants to schools in June or September. This called for the school systems to begin developing proposals in March. If their funding ended in June, they could not make plans for summer activities because they could not be certain the Trustees would award them grants. For the same reason, if their funding was scheduled to end in September, they could not plan for activities during the first few months of the school year. The Trustees, in turn, had to consider grant recommendations without the benefit of complete data from the school systems for the previous school year.

Under the proposed schedule, Trustees would consider 12- or 24-month grants in December. This would enable school systems to be certain of their funding status for the following summer and beginning of school. It would also permit the Trustees to consider the grant recommendation with a more complete understanding of a school system's performance during the previous school year. To further increase the Trustees' and Program staff's understanding, we would propose moving the

Program's June Advisory Committee meeting to September. We would use this meeting as an opportunity for accountability and feedback for school systems supported by the Foundation. Representatives of the school systems would appear at the Advisory Committee meeting to present and discuss their respective school system's annual report on the progress of middle school reform.

Second Strategy: Community Support for Middle School Reform

In communities where we support systemic middle school reform, we would try to foster broad support for the reform, and raise awareness about content and performance standards for middle school students. This strategy could include support for opinion polls, community dialogues, training for parents, focus groups, education "summits," and newsletters or other interpretive materials. Grantees might range from the local Chamber of Commerce to the teachers' union. Because local expertise in how to build understanding and support may be lacking, we might have to make grants to one or more national organizations to assist local groups or prime the pump.

Third Strategy: National Scope

We would establish a National Consortium for Middle School Reform, a network of organizations advancing middle school reform. The Consortium would include organizations with programs or projects intended to enhance student performance by reforming middle schools, and committed to sharing with each other the positive and negative results of the respective organizations' initiatives. We would recommend support for one group to organize and manage the Consortium, foster communication among members, organize an annual meeting of the members, produce an annual directory of member organizations, and publish a newsletter three times a year focusing on lessons and other results of the organizations' projects.

Central to the Consortium would be organizations supported by the Foundation to advance middle school reform on a broad front. We would identify and recommend support for organizations which would (a) from a critical perspective advocate enhanced student performance as the primary purpose of reform, (b) systematically develop/collect, analyze, and report information about the wide variety of middle school reform initiatives throughout the nation, (c) identify the programs, projects, and consultants throughout the nation that have the best track record for advancing reforms that enhance student performance, and share this information with school systems, schools, and policy makers, (d) train school boards and superintendents in how to enhance student performance by using content and performance standards and reforming middle schools, (e) in partnership with other organizations, sponsor local, state and national seminars and conferences to encourage reflection and debate about middle school reform, and (f) use computer networks to link school systems, schools, teachers, and private organizations seeking to enhance student performance through middle school reform. We would recommend Foundation support for organizations proposing to carry out one or more of these activities.

CONCLUSION

The new Program for Student Achievement will focus more intensely on the need to improve student learning and raise students' performance against rigorous academic standards. We would expect urban school systems who are or become our partners to be equally committed to reforming themselves to enable all students — including traditionally low-performing students — to achieve at high levels. We hope that the dedication and hard work of the school districts with whom we are involved will signal to other urban middle schools that they too must embrace change for the sake of their students.